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AUTHOR Aldrich, Pearl G.
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ABSTRACT

In an effort to identify some factors that interfere with effective writing in adult writers, a three-page questionnaire was administered to 165 adults, most with technical degrees, who worked in the Washington, D. C., area. Respondents were top to middle management personnel who spent a significant portion of their time on the job writing and who were responsible for originating substantive written documents. After a tabulation of the findings, the questionnaire was refined and administered to an additional 89 people from other business groups. The original questionnaire consisted of 20 questions--13 asking for information about the respondents' background and how they write, and the remaining 7 asking the respondents to manipulate the language. Results indicated that the majority of respondents did not know that they needed to make preparatory decisions before starting a writing task, or, if they did know, how or when to make them. From the second questionnaire it was determined that many of the respondents had negative feelings about writing. From this survey it appears that lack of knowledge about the value of preparation and no method by which to do it are at the root of adult writing problems. These problems cause adults to be anxious, defensive, and reluctant to approach their writing tasks until the last minute, with the result that they produce disorganzied and ineffective writing. (HOD)

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ADULT WRITERS:

SOME FACTORS THAT INTERFERE

WITH EFFECTIVE WRITING

A

REPORT

of a

Survey Conducted

in

Washington, D.C.

1979

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Pearl G. Aldrich, Ph.D.
Educational Consultant
4701 Kenmore Ave., #905
Alexandria, VA 22304

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ADULT WRITERS: SOME FACTORS THAT INTERFERE WITH EFFECTIVE WRITING

by: Pearl G. Aldrich

Thousands of adults write for a living today who never intended to when they were in college. They thought they were going to be engineers, chemists, mathematicians, physicists, lawyers, accountants, and earned appropriate degrees. Pursuing their careers, they find themselves in jobs that require them not only to write, but also to write efficiently and effectively. Their careers depend upon it. Although most of them are proficient in grammar and mechanical skills such as punctuation, these professionals prove to be inefficient and ineffective writers--so much so that the national outcry increases each year about the low calibre of writers produced by our schools and colleges.

Many researchers have addressed the problems of student writers, but, until the summer of 1979 when I conducted a survey of professionals who must write as part of their jobs, we had little information about the problems of adult writers. The information collected in this pioneer effort identifies several factors that interfere with adult writing which seem to be inextricably

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linked. They are little or no advance planning of writing tasks, inability to organize content, and fear and avoidance of writing. Although they have few major grammar problems, these people nonetheless have difficulty writing clearly and concisely. Their style is clumsy, redundant, and full of technical pomposities such as "a summative-phase comprehensive assessment of the project's overall impact," when the writer meant, "a report of the projects effect."

This style, which includes all the overblown prose current in business and government, results, I think, from the writers' attempts to hide behind a barricade of words--any words, the more the better--so that their confusions about writing and their fear that they can't write well will not be revealed.

Although the original survey needs to be extended to larger numbers for statistical analysis, the following report of its findings provides useful information upon which to base training programs.

THE SURVEY

The survey instrument was a three-page questionnaire administered to 165 adults at work, most with technical degrees, divided among the military, Federal civil service, and high technology consulting firms whose products are documents. The respondents were top- to mid-level managers who spend a significant portion of their time on the job writing and who are responsible for originating substantive written documents.

Seven organizations cooperated. They were the Air Force and Navy in the Joint Chiefs of Staff section at the Pentagon, Army personnel from the Military District of Washington, the Department of Labor, and three corporations from the private sector: Rand, BDM, and Planning Research Corporation. These consulting firms act as "think tanks" for government and industry.

After tabulating the findings of this questionnaire, I refined some of the questions and administered a revised version to an additional 89 people from Satellite Business Systems, the Navy Sea Weapons Command, The Army Computer Command, and another group from the Military District of Washington, who met the criteria.

Choice of respondents who met the criteria in the first group was left to the person in each cooperating organization who administered the questionnaires. They were answered by each respondent at his/her desk, with the only identification being gender, age within a decade, and amount of education.

The second group was made up of students in six of my Effective Writing Courses--two each for Satellite Business Systems and the Military District of Washington; one each Navy Sea Weapons and Army Computer Commands.

The military groups were composed primarily of civilian managers, GS 12 and up. In Federal Civil Service, professional rank starts at GS 12 and reaches into the supergrades, GS 14 through 18. Of the military officers, both from the Pentagon and in my classes, the median rank was Lt. Colonel and its equivalent in the Navy. In the Navy Sea Weapons Command, the class were all civilian engineers, ranging from GS 9 through 13. In fact, engineers numbered the largest single professional group among the total respondents.

In the four corporations, Rand, BDM, Planning Research, and Satellite Business Systems, the respondents ranged from people recently promoted to management to those with years of executive experience; from group leaders to chief executive of a division and several vice-presidents. Their managerial specialities included accounting, computers, naval research, satellite communications, and engineering.

Following completion of the first questionnaire, I interviewed one of every 15 respondents for verification and elaboration. This averaged one or

two individuals per organization. Interviews ran from 15 minutes to an hour and a half. In class, no separate interviews were held specifically about the second questionnaire, but student comments provided verification and elaboration.

THE RESPONDENTS

Of the original 165, 137 had college degrees ranging from AA through PhD. In the second group of 89, 48 had college degrees. The largest number fell into the Bachelor's and Master's categories. Men predominated. Of the few women, two were engineers. Most, particularly newly promoted managers, were in computer work, training, and personnel.

Slightly more than half the total respondents had no training in writing other than freshman composition--139 of 254. The rest had taken additional college courses and Effective Writing Workshops provided by their employers.

Their writing includes every kind of report possible in a technological society. They also write correspondence, product plans, training materials, user's manuals, proposals for contracts, policy statements, staff papers, briefings, staff summaries, pamphlets, brochures, instructions, and books.

In the first group, more than half rated themselves excellent and above-average writers, 96 of the 165. Forty rated themselves average. In the second group, 51 of the 89 rated themselves average; 17, above-average; 1, excellent. The rest in both groups considered themselves below-average writers.

THE FINDINGS

The original questionnaire consisted of 20 questions. Thirteen asked for information about the respondents' background and how they write; seven asked the respondents to manipulate the language. Responses to two questions, #9 and #19, provided keys to the problems of on-the-job-writers.

Question #9 consisted of two lists, and respondents were asked to rank the order in which they performed the following tasks: "Preparing to write" and "Writing." Responses to "Preparing to write" were the most informative.

The instructions were ". . . number the operations in the sequence that you perform them. Leave blank those that you do not perform. If you perform two or more simultaneously, give all those the same number."

(a) Preparing to write:

_____ Research subject.

_____ Determine point you intend to make.

_____ Identify audience.

_____ Determine purpose of paper.

_____ Plan or outline paper.

_____ Limit subject.

_____ Discuss paper with colleague.

_____ Discuss paper with supervisor.

Except for the last two elements, these are preparatory steps for organizing content. Participants were assigned numbers and their responses were recorded on matrices, one for each participating organization. Following are two examples:

HIGH TECHNOLOGY CONSULTING FIRM

Participants:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1. Determine purpose:	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	2		2	2	3	1	3	1	-	2
2. Identify audience:	2	4	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	7	5	2	1	2	3	3	2	3	4		1	7	2	3	2	1	-	3
3. Research subject:	6	3	3	3	3	5	3	2	4	5	6	2	2	5	3		4	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	7	2	6	2	1	1
4. Determine Point:	3	2	2	1	4	4	4	4	5	3	4	3	7	3	6	4	3	1	1	4		3	2	6	4	3	7	2	9	4
5. Plan or outline:	5	8	4	2	2,6	8	5	4	5	6	5	3	5	4	2	4	5	3	5	4	5	4	3	8	6	4	5	3	5	5
6. Limit subject:	4	5	5		4	3	6	6		3	4	7	4	3	2,4		2	5	2		6		2	5	8		3	5	7	6
Optional: Discuss with supervisor:	8	7	2	4	5	7	8	9		1	8	10	7	8	1			6	5			1	3	4	5		1	8	3	
Optional: Discuss with colleague:	7	6	1	5	5	6	7	6		7	7	10	6	7	2	5	4	4	5				3	3	2		4	-	2	-

MILITARY AT JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF LEVEL

Participants:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1. Determine purpose:	1	1	2	2	3	1	2	1	1	4		1	3	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	1		3	1	1	1	2	2
2. Identify audience:	6	6	1	1		1	6		3		1	2	1	2		5	2	3	2	4	3	1	2	7	5	3	3	4		3
3. Research subject:	5	2	4	4	2	5	5	2	1	1	3	1	2	3	2	1	3	6	4	2	1	2		5	3	5	4	1		1
4. Determine Point:	2	3	3	3	3	7	1	3	2		1	4	2	2	1	4	5	2	3		2	1	1	6	4	2	2	3		4
4. Plan or outline:	7		5	5	3	8	4	4	4	2	4	5	3	4	3	6		8	5	3	4		3	4	2	4	5	6		4
4. Limit subject:	3	4		6	3	6	2		5	3	2	6	3	1		3	4	7	6	5	4	1			6	6	2	5		5
Optional: Discuss with supervisor:		7		8		3			4		5	8	5	1		8		5	7	6	5	3	4	1	8	8	7	7		6
Optional: Discuss with colleague:	4	8		7	4	4	3		4		3	7	4	3		7		4			1	3		2	7	7	6			

PREPARING TO WRITE

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Few of the respondents performed these functions in an orderly manner, and some omitted necessary steps.

The information provided by items marked one should be known before starting a writing task, although which is identified first is unimportant. Researching the subject or gathering the data is the obvious next step. Determining the point or points of the document, according to its purpose and audience, provides the information from which to organize the data. By preparing a writing plan or outline, the writer limits the subject; therefore, both items were numbered four. Making these decisions before starting a writing task gives the writer the organization for his/her material.

The responses to this question provided a major clue to the writing problems of these 165 people and, presumably, other adult writers. They do not know that they need to make these preparatory decisions, or if they do know, how or when to make them.

One of the Pentagon generals commented that he didn't understand why his officers made better oral presentations than written ones. At the time, I

didn't either, but after tabulating the answers to question #9 and including in the interviews questions about both spoken and written presentations, the difference became clear. When the officers have to make an oral presentation, they prepare for it. When they have to write, they do not.

The responses to question #19 also proved important. The question appeared in the section on manipulating the language and asked the respondents to do the following:

> Rewrite the following sentence if it needs it. If it's ok as it stands, leave the line blank.
>
> "During the last audit a finding was noticed concerning discrepancies between signatures on pay vouchers and the way the names are typed on the vouchers."

The sentence, written clumsily and containing a violation of parallel structure, was taken from an average writing sample submitted in one of my classes. The responses were coded "improved" if the respondent identified the problems in the sentence by correcting them in the revision. Responses were coded "no better" or "worse" if the revisions did not correct the grammar and/or improve the style. Responses were coded "ok" if the respondent did not recognize the problems and considered the sentence ok by leaving the line blank. Of the responses, 101 of the 165 fell into the "no better," "worse," or "ok" categories. Only 64 of the 165 corrected the parallel structure and improved the style. Of these, 14 were among the 30 who rated themselves excellent writers, 37 were among the 66 who rated themselves above average, and 15 were among the 69 who rated themselves average and below average writers. These figures showed that performance was the same among the self-designated excellent and above-average writers--an interesting point that led to the following:

While I was considering these results and studying the questionnaires, I noticed comments written on the papers by the self-designated excellent and above-average writers that did not appear on the papers of the people who rated themselves average or below-average.

Some of the remarks seemed defensive and hostile; testy at best, downright nasty at the worst. Several of those who apparently did not know what parallel structure is attacked the question instead of answering "I don't know" or leaving the space blank. One said that parallel structure were "good buzz words for writing skills marketeers, but poor communications."

Another respondent wrote a long message on the back of the questionnaire saying how short-sighted and wrong it was to include one of the questions. One spoke of the "tense of the noun" and another of the "voice" of a collective noun. Others wrote caustic criticisms of the examples, of the verbs chosen, and of the researcher, whom they had not met. Most of these people were among those who did not improve the sentence in #19.

People who rated themselves excellent and above-average writers seemed touchy and defensive about responding to a questionnaire revealing how they write and what they know about writing. From their reaction, you would think I had asked them to walk naked down the street, and, in a way, I had. Writing is such an intimate act that writing even a technical document full of mathematical equations exposes the writer, and these questions evoked a negative attitude.

At that time, I didn't call this attitude "writing anxiety" or fear. I interpreted it as over-confidence, which the interviews seemed to confirm. The interviewees talked a good game, which the responses on their questionnaires did not support. However, after a discussion with a colleague who had observed writing anxiety among college freshmen, I developed a second questionnaire

with several items about attitude, a simplified question about preparation, and collected information from the additional 89 people.

The question about preparation was, "Approximately how much time do you spend preparing for your writing tasks?" The answers ranged from as little as five minutes to as long as two months. As long as necessary, it depends, too long, too little. Some people put a question mark in the answer blank. One or two wrote, "Huh?" This supports the original finding that adult writers appear to have no real grasp of what preparation is or what it means to both the process of their writing and the final product.

The questions about attitude are as follows:

11. Writing (1) exhilarates me ( ),
(2) depresses me ( ),
(3) frightens me ( ),
(4) bores me ( ),
(5) is just another part of the job ( ).

12. Writing (1) gives me a sense of power ( ),
(2) makes me feel that I have given order to chaos ( ),
(3) makes me grouchy ( ),
(4) satisfies me ( ).

13. I approach a writing task with (1) apprehension ( ),
(2) enthusiasm ( ),
(3) boredom ( ),
(4) eagerness ( ),
(5) reluctance ( ),
(6) joy ( ),
(7) dread ( ),
(8) downright hate ( ).

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Of the 89 people, 49 checked negative feelings about writing--apprehension, reluctance, dread. Some checked all three; a few, "downright hate." In contrast, the positive reactions were 26 of the 89. Nine people recorded ambivalent reactions, suggesting that they experience a love-hate relationship with their writing assignments, and five didn't answer.

The number of negative answers seems to indicate that dread and apprehension are probably preventing otherwise competent people from approaching their writing tasks confidently.

From this survey of 254 professionals who must write to perform their jobs, it appears that lack of knowledge about the value of preparation and no method by which to do it are at the root of their problems about writing. These problems cause them to be anxious, defensive, and reluctant to approach their writing tasks until the last minute. As a result, they produce disorganized and ineffective writing. In the long run, their ineffective writing can affect their careers by slowing promotion through the managerial ranks and, perhaps, preventing their attaining top executive positions.